Patterns of Power

Who Owns What

Why Every Durable Order Is, Beneath Its Robe, a Binding Settlement of Who Owns What Among the Armed — and Why the Warlord Who Cannot Make One Cannot Last

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Preface

The studies before this one described a structure — a floor of force, a managed belief laid over it, a priesthood to tend the belief — and traced its rise and fall across the centuries. This one asks what the structure is *for*. It is the inquiry's pursuit of its own deepest question, the *why* beneath the *what*: why force should require a belief at all rather than simply compelling, and why the same architecture should recur in civilisations that never met. The answer it reaches is more concrete than the grandeur of the apparatus suggests. Strip away the robe and the long words, and every durable order is, at bottom, a settlement of the first question any group of armed men must answer if they are to stop fighting — who owns what.

The argument follows that kernel through its stages. Under bare force nothing is owned, only held, which is why the warlord who never makes a settlement — Attila, Timur — builds nothing that outlasts him. The first step off the floor is the strongman who settles and taxes rather than plunders, acquiring an interest in his subjects' prosperity; but he alone cannot outlast his own death. The durable form is a coalition of the armed, bound by a distribution of holdings that gives each a stake he would lose in a war — the property settlement is itself the mechanism that keeps the peace. And what makes that settlement binding across the generations, where bare interest fails, is belief: it converts a revocable bargain among armed men into a sacred and inheritable trust, and so carries the settlement across the chasm of succession on which force always founders.

Once the settlement holds, it frees the coordination — the secure property and enforceable contract on which all commerce rests — and here the study turns to its harder truths. The settlement is made by and for the armed; its law is first a law for elites; and the common man, though the order was not made for him, is given by it a framework that becomes the whole of his life and happens to fix him at the bottom. To see all this clearly, the study argues at its close, is not cynicism but the first condition of the only hope there is: not to worship the settlement or to raze it, but to keep prying open the circle of those for whom it is made. The argument leans on the political economy of Mancur Olson and of North, Wallis, and Weingast, whose findings it recalls and connects rather than discovers anew.

A Note on This Collaboration

As throughout, the spine is Thomas J. Bryan's and the articulation the model's. The central insight of this study — that the order exists, at bottom, to settle who owns what among those who could otherwise fight, and that belief is what makes the settlement binding across generations — is his, arrived at independently; the documentary work has been to verify that it is also, in substance, the settled finding of a serious literature in political economy, and to attribute it accordingly.

Two disciplines govern the piece. The load-bearing theory is checked against its sources and credited to them — Olson on the roving and stationary bandit, North and his colleagues on the natural state — and the historical contrast of the conqueror who builds nothing against the civilisation that endures is checked against the record. And the argument refuses the cynicism it courts: it insists that the goods the settlement delivers are real, that the peace and the coordination and the common man's framework are true goods and not merely the powerful's con, and that the functional account, like every claim in this project, is held as tested and not revealed — an illumination of the kernel of durable order, not a reduction of all human things to property and force.

The Argument in Nine Parts

I — The First Question. Beneath the floor of force and the robe of belief lies a single function that explains them both: every durable order is, at bottom, an answer to one question — who owns what.

II — The Roving Sword. Under bare force nothing is owned, only held — held exactly as long as it can be defended — which is why the warlord, however vast his conquest, builds nothing that outlasts him. Attila's empire died with him; Timur's kingdom vanished with his life.

III — The Bandit Who Stays. The first step toward order is the strongman who settles, taxes rather than plunders, and so gains an interest in his subjects' prosperity — Olson's stationary bandit — but who, alone, still cannot outlast his own death.

IV — The Bargain of the Armed. A durable order is not one bandit but a coalition of them, bound by a distribution of holdings that gives each a stake he would lose in a war. The property settlement — the king's grant, the noble's oath — is itself the mechanism that keeps the peace.

V — The Binding. Bare interest cannot hold a settlement, for the strong can always recalculate. What binds the bargain across time and across the death of its makers is belief, which converts a balance of force into a sacred and inheritable obligation — and so is load-bearing.

VI — The Coordination Freed. Once holdings are secure and elite contracts enforceable, the metabolism of commerce is released. The settlement is not only a peace among the armed but the precondition of all economic coordination — though the redress, at first, runs at the level of the elite.

VII — The Order Is for the Armed. The whole settlement is made by and for those who could otherwise fight — a deal among the armed about how they will share the world and treat with rival orders. At this level, history has almost nothing to do with the common man.

VIII — The Framework That Becomes a Life. Yet the common man is given by the settlement a framework — a predictable world — which becomes the whole of his life and happens to fix him at the bottom, and which the robe then tells him is his nature. The cage is also a shelter.

IX — The Why, and Its Limits. The function beneath the structure is the binding settlement of who owns what among the armed, made durable by belief. To see this is not despair but the first condition of the only question that matters: who is inside the settlement, and can the circle be widened.

A Note on Sources

This study rests on a literature in political economy and on the established historical record, and connects them to the project's own framework.

The theory. The distinction of the roving from the stationary bandit, the idea of the autocrat's encompassing interest, and the observation that orders resting on one man's force rarely prosper beyond a generation are drawn from Mancur Olson, above all his "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development" (1993). The account of the durable order as a dominant coalition of the armed, bound by the rents that limited access creates — the "natural state" or "limited-access order" — is drawn from Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast, "Violence and Social Orders" (2009). Both are recalled and paraphrased, not quoted at length.

The history. The contrast of the conqueror who builds nothing with the civilisation that endures rests on the record of Attila's Hunnic empire, which disintegrated at his death in 453, and of Timur, whose realm fragmented at his death in 1405 for want of any lasting institution — set against the belief-bound settlements, Roman and other, that lasted for centuries. The feudal bargain of fief and fealty is drawn from the standard account of medieval landholding.

The lineage. Beneath all of it lies this project's own framework — the floor of force and the managed belief, the convergent priesthood, the coordinating metabolism, and the studies of how orders rise, fall, and are torn out — for which this study supplies the underlying *why*.

Part I

THE FIRST QUESTION

That beneath the floor of force and the robe of belief lies a single function which explains them both — for every durable order, at bottom, is an answer to one question: who owns what

The studies that precede this one have described a structure — a floor of force, a managed belief laid over it, a priesthood to tend the belief — and traced its rise and fall across the centuries. But a structure described is not a structure explained, and a reader who has followed the whole inquiry is entitled to ask the question it has so far circled without quite naming: *why?* Why should this particular architecture recur, in civilisation after civilisation that never met? Why should force require a belief at all, rather than simply compelling? What is the whole apparatus *for*? This short study attempts the answer, and the answer turns out to be simpler, and more concrete, than the grandeur of the apparatus suggests. Strip away the robe and the priesthood and the long words, and every durable order is, at bottom, a settlement of one question — the first question any group of armed men must answer if they are to stop fighting: *who owns what.*

The settlement beneath the robe

Consider what a government, of any age or kind, actually does when one looks past its self-description. It declares who holds the land, who may keep the harvest, whose claim to a thing will be backed by the swords of the order and whose will not. A king is, before he is anything else, the man whose word settles title; a court is, before it is anything else, the place where disputed ownership is fixed; a law is, before it is anything else, a rule about what is whose. The robe of belief that the genealogies anatomised — the doctrine that the order is God's will, or nature's law, or the verdict of the market — is wrapped, in every case, around this hard kernel: a distribution of *property*, of who shall hold what, that the order exists to declare and to defend. And the floor of force beneath the belief is what stands ready when the declaration is challenged. The structure is built around the settlement the way a vault is built around what it keeps. This study traces the kernel: how the settlement is made, why it cannot hold on force alone, why it needs the belief, what it frees once it holds, whom it is for, and why the warlords who never make it vanish while the orders that do endure for a thousand years.

Part II

THE ROVING SWORD

That under bare force nothing is owned but only held — held exactly as long as it can be defended — and that this is why the warlord, however vast his conquest, builds nothing that outlasts him

Begin where order does not yet exist, on the bare floor of force, to see what the settlement is a settlement *of*. Under warlordism — rule by armed men with no binding agreement among them — nothing is truly *owned*. A thing is merely *held*, and held only so long as its holder can defend it by the sword, and not one hour longer. The harvest belongs to whoever can take it; the land to whoever can hold it this season; and every possession is provisional, perpetually up for seizure, secure only to the strength of the arm that grips it. This is not a defect that warlordism can reform. It is what warlordism *is* — the condition of property before there is a settlement, in which ownership and force are the same thing, and the question of who owns what is reopened with every campaign.

The conqueror who builds nothing

The deepest proof of the point is the figure of the great conqueror who builds nothing that lasts, and history offers him in his purest form. Attila gathered a vast multi-ethnic empire by the sword and terrified two Roman empires for a generation; at his sudden death in 453 his confederation disintegrated, almost overnight, into warring factions, and the empire of the Huns simply ceased to exist. A thousand years later Timur — Tamerlane — conquered from Delhi to Anatolia in a career of spectacular brutality, raising towers of skulls, and at his death in 1405 his empire fragmented at once among his quarrelling sons; a historian's verdict was that his career had been a singularly barren one, his kingdom vanishing with his life, his whole enterprise no more than the agglomeration of sheer power built on the corpses of millions. The reason is structural, not personal. Attila and Timur were roving swords; they took, and moved on, and never converted their force into a *settlement* — never built the binding arrangement by which holdings become secure, succession orderly, and the order independent of the man at its head. They held everything and owned nothing, and so, when the arm that gripped it fell, there was nothing to inherit but the war. The warlord cannot found a civilisation because he never answers the first question; he only keeps reopening it.

Part III

THE BANDIT WHO STAYS

That the first step from force toward order is the strongman who settles, takes a regular share instead of everything, and so acquires an interest in the prosperity of those he holds — but who, alone, still cannot outlast his own death

The first step off the bare floor was named, with great clarity, by the economist Mancur Olson, and it is worth following because it shows the settlement beginning to form out of pure self-interest, before any belief is invoked. Olson distinguished the *roving* bandit from the *stationary* one. The roving bandit — the warlord of the part above — plunders and departs, taking everything, leaving his victims no reason to produce anything he will only seize; and where roving bandits compete, nothing is built. But suppose one bandit settles, monopolises the theft of a given territory, and rationalises it into regular *taxation* — taking a fixed share rather than everything. He has thereby acquired what Olson called an *encompassing interest* in his domain: because next year's tax depends on this year's harvest, he now has a reason to protect his subjects from other thieves, to refrain from killing them, to leave them enough that they will plant again. The bandit who stays, in Olson's memorable image, settles down, wears a crown, and replaces anarchy with government — and his subjects, knowing now that they may keep whatever the fixed tax leaves them, acquire for the first time a reason to invest and produce.

The limit of the lone strongman

This is the settlement in embryo: a holder of force converts plunder into a standing arrangement, and in doing so begins to *secure* the property of those beneath him, because their security is now his revenue. But the lone stationary bandit has not yet built a durable order, and Olson named the reason precisely. The bandit's restraint depends on his expecting a long tenure; the moment his hold looks brief — the moment succession is in doubt — it pays him to seize everything while he can, and the calculation that protected his subjects collapses. And succession, in a rule resting on one man's force, is *always* in doubt, which is why, Olson observed, autocracies rarely prosper for much more than a single generation. The stationary bandit secures property within his life and loses it at his death; he is Timur with a tax-system. To make the settlement outlast the man, two things more are needed — a coalition, and a belief — and the next parts take them in turn.

Part IV

THE BARGAIN OF THE ARMED

That a durable order is not one bandit but a coalition of them, bound by a distribution of holdings that gives each a stake he would lose in a war — so that the property settlement is itself the mechanism that keeps the peace

A durable order is rarely the work of a single strongman; it is a *coalition* of armed men who have agreed to stop fighting each other, and the terms of that agreement are, precisely, a settlement of who owns what. The political economists North, Wallis, and Weingast gave this arrangement its best modern name — the *natural state*, or *limited-access order* — and described its mechanism exactly. A dominant coalition of the groups capable of violence divides among themselves the valuable things — above all the land, and the lucrative activities — granting each member a secure and privileged holding. And here is the crucial turn: because each man's holding is valuable only so long as the coalition holds, and would be lost in the chaos of a war, every member acquires a direct interest in keeping the peace. The distribution of property is not a consequence of the order; it *is* the order — the very mechanism by which a set of men who could fight are given, each of them, more to lose than to gain by fighting.

The shape of the bargain

The classic form of this bargain, the one Western history made its own, is the feudal settlement, and seen through this lens its logic is transparent. The king holds the land — holds it, the belief will say, of God — and by his decree grants portions of it to his great nobles as fiefs; and in return each noble swears an oath of fealty and pledges his arms, his promise to come with his knights when the king calls. Each party gets exactly what the settlement exists to provide. The noble gets a secure, heritable holding, his title to which is now backed by the whole order rather than by his sword alone. The king gets the pledged force that makes him able to defend the whole against outsiders and against any member who breaks the peace. The interests align; the position-logic of every armed man points the same way, toward upholding the arrangement that guarantees his own holding; and the perpetual reopening of the first question — who owns what — is, for the first time, closed. What had been a war of all the swords becomes a settled hierarchy of secure estates, because each sword has been bought off with a stake. The rents and privileges, as North and his colleagues put it, are the glue of the coalition.

Part V

THE BINDING

That bare interest cannot hold a settlement, because the strong can always recalculate — and that what makes the bargain binding across time and across the death of its makers is belief, which converts a balance of force into a sacred and inheritable obligation

The bargain of the armed, resting on aligned interest alone, has a fatal weakness, and naming it reveals at last why the whole apparatus needs a *belief* — why force and self-interest are not enough, and a robe must be thrown over them. Interest is fickle. The alignment that makes peace rational today can be undone tomorrow by a shift in strength: a noble who grows powerful enough recalculates, and finds that seizing his neighbour's estate, or the king's crown, now pays better than keeping the peace. A settlement held by interest alone is therefore only ever as stable as the current balance of force, and the balance of force always changes — which is why the stationary bandit and the bare coalition both founder on succession, the moment when the balance is most uncertain and the temptation to grab is greatest. Bare interest can begin a settlement. It cannot bind one.

What makes a settlement binding

What binds it is belief, and now the function of the whole robe comes into focus. When the king holds the land not merely by force but *of God*, the grant he makes is no longer a revocable bargain struck among armed men; it is a sacred trust, and to seize it is not shrewd opportunism but sacrilege. When the noble's oath of fealty is sworn upon holy relics before God, his pledge is lifted out of the realm of interest, where it could be recalculated, into the realm of the sacred, where it cannot. The belief does to the property settlement exactly what the genealogies showed it doing to hierarchy in general: it converts a made and contestable arrangement into a given and uncontestable one — and in doing so it *binds* the settlement, makes breaking it not merely costly but unthinkable, and so holds it stable even when the balance of force shifts. And it does one thing more, the thing the lone bandit could never do: because the sacred title does not die with the man who holds it but passes, sanctified, to his heir, the belief makes the settlement *inheritable*, and so carries it across the chasm of succession on which bare force always foundered. This is the deepest answer the inquiry has to give to its own first question. The belief is load-bearing because the belief is what makes the property settlement *binding and durable* — what lets it outlast the strongman, survive the shift of strength, and pass intact to the next generation. Timur, who had only force, vanished with his life. Rome, which had the settlement and the belief that bound it, lasted a thousand years.

Part VI

THE COORDINATION FREED

That once holdings are secure and elite contracts are enforceable, the metabolism of commerce is released — so that the property settlement is not only a peace among the armed but the precondition of all economic coordination

Once the settlement holds — once property is secure and the order will enforce a bargain — something is released that bare force could never produce: *coordination*. This is the settlement's great gift, and the reason the orders that achieve it grow rich while the warlord's lands stay poor. Secure property is the precondition of all production beyond the hand-to-mouth, because no one will clear a field, dig a mine, or build a mill whose fruits a passing sword may seize; only when a man knows that what he makes will be his — that the order stands behind his title — does it become rational to invest, to improve, to defer. Olson saw this clearly: the subjects of the stationary bandit produce because they know they may keep what the tax leaves them. And enforceable contract is the precondition of all commerce beyond the handshake, because trade among strangers, across distances, on credit and on promises, is possible only where a broken bargain can be brought before a power that will make it good. The settlement supplies exactly this — a *method of redress*, a court, a standing authority to which the wronged party can appeal instead of reaching for his sword.

The metabolism and its membership

Here the present study joins the inquiry into the coordinating metabolism that the wider project has traced — the vast web of exchange that lets a society sustain populations far past what any household could feed itself. That metabolism does not run on force; force only seizes, it cannot coordinate. It runs on the security and the enforceability that *only a settled order can provide*, which is why commerce flourishes under the durable civilisations and withers under the warlord, whose roving sword reopens every title and honours no contract. But one feature of this freed coordination must be marked, for it foreshadows the study's harder turn: the redress, in the natural state, runs at the level of the *elite*. The court that enforces the great contract, the law that secures the heritable estate, the third-party power that makes the bargain good — these serve, in the first instance and often the only instance, the members of the dominant coalition. The settlement frees coordination; but it frees it, first, among the men the settlement was made by and for.

Part VII

THE ORDER IS FOR THE ARMED

That the whole settlement is made by and for those who could otherwise fight — a deal among the armed about how they will share the world and treat with rival orders — and that, at this level, history has almost nothing to do with the common man

It must now be said plainly, because the whole logic of the settlement drives toward it: the order is *for the armed*. The settlement of who owns what is a deal struck among the men who could otherwise fight — the king and his nobles, the dominant coalition, the holders of force — about how they will divide the world among themselves and refrain from killing each other over it. Its law, as North and his colleagues observe of the natural state, is in the first place a *law for elites*, enforced unequally, resting on privilege and rank and on the frank premise that not all men are equal. The genealogies' robe of nature is woven precisely to drape this premise; but beneath the robe the premise is simply the truth of the arrangement, which was never a compact among all the people but a treaty among the powerful.

A world of hierarchies treating with hierarchies

Seen at its own level, then, history is largely the story of the armed settling and re-settling the first question among themselves — and, beyond their own borders, treating with *other* such settlements, other durable hierarchies, in the second great game the wider inquiry has examined: the diplomacy and alliance and war and trade by which orders deal with orders, the level at which a pax is struck or broken among the powers. The king negotiates with the king, the coalition with the coalition; marriages and treaties and tariffs and wars are the moves; and the stakes are always, at bottom, the same first question carried up to the level of whole realms — whose claim, whose holding, whose share. The common man appears in this history hardly at all, except as the thing fought over, the population whose labour and land are the assets the settlement distributes and the wars contest. The order is not, at this level, about him. It is the armed, dividing the world.

Part VIII

THE FRAMEWORK THAT BECOMES A LIFE

That the common man, though the settlement was not made for him, is given by it a framework — a settled and predictable world — which becomes the whole of his life and happens to fix him at the bottom, and which the robe then tells him is his nature

And yet the common man is not nothing in the settlement, and to leave the matter at the cold truth of the part above would be to miss the half of it that he actually lives. For the settlement, though made by and for the armed, throws off a by-product that falls to him, and it is not negligible: a *framework*. The settled order gives him a world that is predictable — where the sword does not come for his harvest every season, where the tax, however heavy, is at least known, where the stationary bandit who rules him, having an interest in his survival, takes less than the roving one would and forbids his murder by others. After the bare floor of warlordism, this is no small thing; it is the difference between a life and the mere endurance of chaos. The framework the settlement provides becomes, for the man born into it, simply the shape of the world — the water he swims in, the given order of things, the only life he knows.

The cage that is also a shelter

But the framework that becomes his life was built to a measure that was never his, and it fixes him, with quiet exactness, at the bottom. The settlement distributed the land and the privileges among the armed; the common man was not a party to it but one of the things it distributed — his labour assigned, his place fixed, his station the residue left after the powerful had taken their shares. And so the framework that shelters him is also the cage that holds him down, and the two are the same structure seen from below and from the side. Here, at last, the robe of the genealogies does its final work, and the whole inquiry closes its circle. For the framework is a *made* thing, the residue of a bargain struck above his head among armed men he never met; but the managed belief tells him it is no such thing — tells him his low place is the order of nature, the will of God, the verdict of the market, the level his blood has earned. The settlement made him; the robe tells him he was born this way. And because the framework is the whole of the world he knows, the telling is believed — which is why, as the wider inquiry has insisted, the belief is a formation and not a fraud, woven into the only life he has, and not to be torn out without tearing him.

Part IX

THE WHY, AND ITS LIMITS

That the function beneath the whole structure is the binding settlement of who owns what among the armed, made durable by belief — and that to see this clearly is not a counsel of despair but the first condition of asking the only question that matters: who is inside the settlement, and can the circle be widened

The chase for the *why* ends here, at the kernel the whole apparatus is built around. A durable hierarchy is a floor of force beneath a managed belief tended by a priesthood; and the reason it takes that form — the function that explains the whole architecture — is that every durable order is, at bottom, a *binding settlement of who owns what among the armed*. The floor of force is the settlement's ultimate backing; the belief is what makes the settlement binding and inheritable, so that it outlasts the strongman and survives the shift of strength; the priesthood is the class that tends the belief; and the coordination, the law, the peace, the whole metabolism of civilisation, are the goods that flow once the settlement holds. This is why the warlords vanish and the civilisations endure — why Timur's kingdom died with him and Rome's lasted a thousand years. The warlord has the floor of force and nothing else; he answers the first question only with his sword, and his answer dies when his arm does. The civilisation answers it with a settlement that belief has bound, and the answer outlives every man who made it.

What the seeing is for

To see this clearly is easily mistaken for cynicism, and the mistake must be refused, for the seeing is not a counsel of despair but the first condition of hope. Three things keep it honest. The first is that the settlement, though made by and for the armed, delivers goods that are *real* — the peace is a true peace, the coordination a true abundance, the framework a true shelter, and the common man under the bound settlement is, for all that it cages him, immeasurably better off than under the roving sword; the stationary order is not merely the warlord's con but also mankind's escape from the warlord. The second is that the account is functional and structural, and like every claim in this project is held as tested, not revealed: it illuminates the kernel of durable order without pretending that every order reduces to property alone, or that the men who built the settlements were only bandits and never also believers, builders, and lawgivers. And the third is the one that matters most. If the order is a *settlement* — a made arrangement about who is inside the circle of secure holding and who is merely one of the things distributed — then the decisive question is not whether to worship it or to raze it, but *who is inside it, and whether the circle can be widened*. The whole movement of the modern age, in the terms of the political economists this study has followed, has been the slow and partial and reversible opening of the settlement — from a closed compact among the armed few toward an order that admits, in principle, everyone; from the law for elites toward a law for all. That opening is the one genuine escape from the natural state, and it is fragile, and unfinished, and never safe. And so the chase for the *why* delivers us, at the end, exactly where the whole inquiry has pointed: to the patient, unfinished, unglamorous work of widening the settlement — of bringing more of the common men who were once merely its subjects inside the circle of those for whom it is made. That is the only victory there is: not to abolish the settlement, which cannot be done, nor to worship it, which is a lie, but to keep prying it open, one generation at a time.